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SAMUEL ELLISON ON THE ELECTION OF 1857

edited by DAVID J. WEBER

IN OR OUT of an election year the predictions of political pundits make interesting reading—the more so if they are wrong. The two letters reproduced herein hold such interest. Written by the territorial secretary, Samuel Ellison, they represent the informed but mistaken views of one knowledgeable observer of New Mexico's hard-fought 1857 election for delegate to the United States Congress. The first letter reveals heady optimism preceding the election, while the second expresses the bitterness of defeat.

The 1857 election for territorial delegate—then New Mexico's most important elected official—enjoys a reputation as “the most bitterly contested election in the history of the territory.”¹ Each contestant called himself a Democrat, but national labels and issues seldom entered into New Mexico politics during this period. Instead, parties represented personalities and the 1857 election proved to be no exception.² The incumbent, Miguel Antonio Otero, seeking his second term, had been educated in the United States and had become a member of the Missouri bar. Son of a prominent New Mexico merchant, the courtly, twenty-eight-year-old Otero was at home on either end of the Santa Fe Trail.³ Otero's opponent, Spruce M. Baird, was also a lawyer, but many referred to him derisively as “Judge.” In 1848, when Texas brazenly claimed much of New Mexico as its “County of Santa Fe,” Baird had been sent to serve as the new county's district judge. Unwanted by the New Mexicans, Baird was never allowed to fill this position and returned home to Texas within a year.⁴

The 1857 election, however, was no simple contest between a "native," Otero, and an "outsider," Baird. "Nativism" was, as Ellison points out, an important issue, but Baird also enjoyed the support of many native New Mexicans and was accused of "declaring himself a better Mexican than Otero." Although "Anglo" Ellison supported Baird, so did "native" José Manuel Gallegos, who was usually identified with the anti-American group in the territory.⁵ Gallegos, a source of some information in Ellison's first letter, had been a priest at Albuquerque before being unfrocked by Bishop Jean Baptiste Lamy. Gallegos then entered politics, becoming territorial delegate in 1853, but losing that office to Miguel Antonio Otero in 1855. Gallegos would again oppose and lose to Otero in 1859.⁶

Although the issues and the outcome of the election of 1857 have long been clear, Ellison's letters furnish fresh insights into local conditions, clarifying, for example, the roles of Bishop Jean Baptiste Lamy and Surveyor General William Pelham. Ellison identifies candidates for a number of local offices and gives the reader some feeling for the intensity of emotions that this campaign aroused. Ellison's letters, and others like them, are important since they constitute a chief source for the political history of this period. For example, no copy of the only Santa Fe newspaper, the *Weekly Gazette*, is known to exist for the year 1857.

Although he had come to New Mexico only as recently as 1848, Samuel Ellison had acquired a position which afforded him an inside view of the Territory's politics. Between 1852 and 1861, he served as secretary, translator, and interpreter for three successive governors: William Carr Lane, David Meriwether, and Abraham Rencher. Most historians, however, remember Ellison's later career as territorial librarian (1881-1889), during which time he is credited with rescuing the local archives.⁷

The recipient of Ellison's two letters, James Josiah Webb, had been active in the Santa Fe trade since 1844 and is best remembered for his memoirs, published as *Adventures in the Santa Fe Trade, 1844-1847*.⁸ Webb had political as well as mercantile interests in New Mexico, and served a one-year term in the lower

house of the Territorial Assembly, beginning in 1856. Despite his involvement, Webb left Santa Fe for his native Connecticut on August 1, 1857. There he remained to manage the eastern end of his firm's business.⁹ Thus, Ellison's letters, written on August 29 and September 30, 1857, enjoy a fullness characteristic of correspondence with a recently departed and knowledgeable friend.

The two letters written by Samuel Ellison are a part of a group of ten letters written to James J. Webb by various persons. Recently acquired by James R. Toulouse, Albuquerque attorney and history enthusiast, these "Webb Letters" have been placed on loan in Special Collections at Zimmerman Library, The University of New Mexico. It is hoped that similar collections, which are now in private hands, will also eventually find their way into public repositories.¹⁰

Santa Fé Aug. 29, 1857

J. J. Webb Esq.

Dr. Sir.

I did not write you by the mail of the 15. according to promise, for the reason, that we had not heard from the different counties, for the election, at present is the all insorbing subject.

The news we get from Doña ana by this mail is cheering our friends write, that we got, a majority of from twelve to fifteen hundred votes in that county. We will lose Socorro by about five hundred, and Valencia by not more than two hundred votes. Baird will get Bernalillo by a majority of two hundred and fifty votes. The meeting for nominating their county ticket was he[l]d on the 24.

inst. [José Manuel] Gallegos was there, and says there were from four to five hundred of the *vox* [meaning the people's voice?] present. Otero and friends attempted to break up the meeting, but they did not succ[eed], a committee of twelve was sent to Otero, who informed he must retire or behave himself. He took them at their word and left, and it is well he did so. Gallegos states, that it was with utmost difficulty, he could keep the people from using violence with Otero. We will gain Santa Ana by at least five hundred votes majority, and this county by, from three to five hundred. Rio Arriba we will win by about two hundred and fifty and Taos by at least the same majority if not greater than that of Rio Arriba. San Miguel is doubtful. There will not be very much difference on either side. The opposition in that county have not been able to nominate their county ticket yet, and the dissatisfaction in the party has caused a large number of their best men to join our party. So much for the news from the different counties.

We nominated our county ticket for this county on the 23.^d inst. Vicario [Juan Felipe] Ortiz, was nominated for the Council, Padre Gallegos, Pablo Delgado, Ramon Sena and Valentino Vasquez of the Placer for the lower house—Anastacio Sandoval for judge of probate and Ygnacio Moya for Sheriff—a very strong ticket, which can not be beaten in this county.

Wilbur had a fight with some soldiers a few nights since, and got his nose nearly bit off. He ought not to run in such bad company.

Our town has been particularly gay for the last few days—filled with American Ladies and gentlemen from different parts of the Territory—I had no idea that there were so many American Ladies in our Territory. Madam Otero,¹¹ is here with some of her Mexican relations, she did not stop with her American friends. All for effect but it will not do—the Mexican women have not forgot that party business.

I will give the result of our labors in the election, by the mail of the 15. of Sept.

Yours truly
SAML. ELLISON

Santa Fé Sept. 30, 1857

J. J. Webb Esq.

Esteemed Friend:

Otero received his certificate of election on yesterday. He was elected by 2512 votes majority. We lost this county by 20 votes—and only got three counties in the Territory, Rio Arriba, Santa Ana and Doña Ana, by small majorities. Our friends did not work, that is the most of them did not. The Bishop [Lamy] took a very active part, he canvassed the counties of San Miguel, Taos, Rio Arriba, Santa Ana, this county and part of Bernalillo—and you know well as I do, the influence he has with people.

As I understand it, the four following causes lost us the election, Nativism, Baird would sell our Territory to Texas if elected, the influence of the Bishop and the Land Department influence—the Surveyor General [William Pelham] wrote letters and signed them officially, calling upon the people to vote for an Hijo del Pais—stating also that he was a *friend to their interests*, I have seen one of his letters. Nothing could be better calculated to work upon these people, than this mode of argument. Many have very large claims pending before this officer, and it is not to be supposed, that they would do any thing that was calculated to injure their cases.

We are badly whiped, lost our Delegate and a large majority against in the Assembly. Jesus M[ari]a Baca y Sena Sheriff There is a good propect [prospect] of our having a very nice time here for the next two years—Old Media Fanega,¹² is our Judge of Probate—a meaner choice could not have been made.

Judge [James S.] Davenport, Major [W. W. H.] Davis¹³ and families will leave on the 15. of October next for the States. The Judge expects to return in the Spring—alone. Neither the Governor [Abraham Rencher] nor Secretary [Alexander M. Jackson] have yet arrived—and will probably not get here before Davis leaves.¹⁴ Gilchrist will take the Judge and the Major in.

A. W. Baile [meaning a wild *baile* or dance?] was given to Otero last night in the Exchange. Madams Otero and [Mrs. Joab] Houghton looked on for a while—make your own comments.

Frank Green was shot through his two thighs, I mean he was wounded in his two thighs by a pistol ball on the 27. inst. by Jose Sacon. Some Soldiers met to the Exchange and called for liquor, and Frank refused to let them have it, when a difficulty ensued, Frank in attempting to put them out, one of the Soldiers drew a Slungshot, and Sacon supposing that Green was in danger, drew his pistol and fired, as he supposed at the soldier, but unfortunately hit Frank. Whereupon Frank, wounded as he was gave Sacon a devil of a thrashing, to the great amusement of the bystanders—Frank is suffering a good deal at present, by [but] he will soon recover,¹⁵ as the ball did not touch the bone. I do not recollect any thing else, that would interest you.

Collins¹⁶ will leave for Washington with the mail of the 15.

Yours Sincerely

SAML. ELLISON

NOTES

1. Loomis Morton Ganaway, *New Mexico and the Sectional Controversy, 1846-1861* (Albuquerque, 1944), p. 64.

2. See Howard Roberts Lamar, *The Far Southwest, 1846-1912: A Territorial History* (Yale, 1966), pp. 101-106, for the most insightful interpretation of the political events of this period, although Lamar mistakenly names José Manuel Gallegos instead of Spruce Baird as the opponent of Otero in 1857 (p. 104).

3. Facets of Otero's career are treated by his son, also Miguel Antonio Otero, in *My Life on the Frontier, 1864-1882* (New York, 1935), and in Ralph Emerson Twitchell, *The Leading Facts of New Mexican History* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1912), vol. 2, pp. 309-10, n. 234.

4. William Campbell Binkley, ed., "Reports from a Texan Agent in New Mexico, 1849," in *New Spain and the Anglo American West* (Lancaster, Pa., 1932), vol. 2, pp. 158-59.

5. Ganaway, pp. 64, 61.

6. Twitchell, vol. 2, pp. 295, 309, 331-34.

7. J. Manuel Espinosa, "Memoir of a Kentuckian in New Mexico, 1848-1884," NMHR, vol. 13 (1938), pp. 4-5. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Arizona and New Mexico* (San Francisco, 1889), p. 19.

8. Edited by Ralph B. Bieber (Glendale, 1931).

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 35-36.

10. The bulk of Webb's correspondence and business papers is housed in the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. The collection is restricted, however, to use by Ralph P. Bieber. In an article published in 1924, Bieber described these papers as "the largest and most important single collection of manuscripts thus far located relating to the commercial development of New Mexico between 1844 and 1861." Ralph P. Bieber, "The Papers of James J. Webb, Santa Fé Merchant, 1844-1861," *Washington University Studies, Humanistic Series*, vol. 11, no. 2 (April, 1924), p. 305.

11. A reference to Otero's new "American" wife, Mary Joseph Blackwood of Charleston, South Carolina, whom he married on April 2, 1857. Otero, pp. 283-84.

12. The nickname of Juan Baca, a merchant who operated a store on San Francisco Street in Santa Fe as early as 1837. He acquired this curious sobriquet, which translates roughly as "half a bushel," by bragging that he owned half a fanega of silver dollars. W. H. H. Allison, "Santa Fe as it Appeared During the Winter of the Years 1837 and 1838," *Old Santa Fe*, vol. 2 (1914), p. 182.

13. Acting Governor of the territory.

14. Ellison was correct. The new governor, Abraham Rencher, did not arrive until November 11, 1857. In the period in between Davis' departure and Rencher's arrival, Ellison was left in charge of the territory. Calvin Horn, *New Mexico's Troubled Years, The Story of the Early Territorial Governors* (Albuquerque, 1963), p. 75.

15. Reuben Frank Green did recover. The following May he wrote to J. J. Webb to report that farming was going well, that he had a contract to deliver mail to El Paso, and that he had married and was planning a trip to the East. (Green's letter is among the ten Webb letters in the University of New Mexico Library.) Green had operated a hotel in Santa Fe since 1849 and was still doing so in 1858. In 1860 Green was one of the first members of the New Mexico Historical Society. Lansing B. Bloom, "Historical Society Minutes, 1859-1863," NMHR, vol. 18 (1943), p. 270.

16. James L. Collins, editor of the *Santa Fe Weekly Gazette*, a strong Otero supporter who would soon be appointed Indian Superintendent of New Mexico.